Gregory Nazianzen's use of negative theology in *oration* 38 (On the nativity)

ABSTRACT – Today, there is a continued need for new scholarship on Gregory the Theologian (ca. 329 – 390 AD), in particular as a mystical author – who in his festal orations combines biblical, Neo-Hellenic and patristic elements in a creative, rhetorical synthesis. By bridging these cultural (and regional) gaps within a liturgical context, Gregory serves as an intermediate figure at the historical fountainhead of Byzantine religious sensibility, drawing equally and at turns from the Hebrew scriptures, early Christian theology, contemporary 4th-century trends in Greek rhetoric, and neo-Platonic ontology. I proceed by arguing: (1) Gregory has been overlooked in general studies on Christian mysticism; (2) apophaticism as religious discourse patently remains a wide-spread, developing phenomenon in the ancient world; (3) Gregory's thirty-eighth *oration* typifies late-antique, early Byzantine 'negative theology'; (4) the Platonic elements of which are striking, yet not fully explanatory. This form of discourse, I argue, is itself a form of cross-cultural exchange.

One of the three great Cappadocian Fathers of the Eastern Church, and an architect of Byzantine liturgical theology, Gregory Nazianzus (also known as Nazianzen or Nazianzenos) has enjoyed a mixed reception in contemporary philosophical-theological studies.[1] Nevertheless, together with John the Apostle and St Simeon, he is also one of three authors in the history of Christianity who received the title 'the Theologian' or ὁ θεολόγος in Byzantine iconography; and yet Nazianzen surprisingly receives little appreciation as a rigorous thinker, apart from his role in the Trinitarian debates immediately surrounding the First Council of Constantinople (381 AD).[2] As a result, he is at times neglected in studies of spiritual theology and mysticism in favour of Gregory of Nyssa, or the third-century Church father Origen of

1. In addition to the text of Andrew LOUTH which I critique below, consider also David BRADSHAW, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), who prefers to discuss the history of Byzantine theology (through the lens of Plotinus and Aristotle) with substantial reference given almost exclusively to Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Palamas, and no extended treatment of Gregory Nazianzen.

2. There are, of course, exceptions here, primarily that of John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), and see also by the same author, '"Perceiving Light from Light" (*Oration* 31.3) The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Gregory the Theologian,' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39/1 (1994): 7-32. For other prominent works on this ancient Christian author, see: R. RUETHER, *Gregory of Nazianzus: Rhetor and Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), and for the historical context of his rhetorical style, see also Susanna ELM, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzeus, and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Celica MILOVANOVIC, 'Sailing to Sophistopolis: Gregory of Nazianzus and Greek Declamation,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13/2 (2005): 187-232; and Neil MCLYNN, 'A Self-Made Holy Man: The Case of Gregory Nazianzen,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6/3 (1998): 463-483. For more theological views, see for example Christos YANNARAS, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (London: T&T Clark Ltd, 1991) [Eng. trans. of Αλφαβητάρι της πίστης.' *Εκδ. Δόμος. Σ*, 87 (1984)] and Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976) [Eng. trans. of *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient* (Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius: Paris, 1944)].

Alexandria – it is, instead, the younger Nyssa more often than not who receives praise for his spiritual flights of Platonic ecstasy.

In the area of rhetoric, where Gregory Nazianzos shines most of all, he must often share the limelight with Basil the Great, his friend and fellow student at the University of Athens. As highly trained as the two were in rhetoric, exegesis and homiletics – an education compared by one modern author to the pedagogy demanded of any modern opera singer – it seems that Basil's orations on the *Hexaëmeron*, for example, compel greater attention.[3] Thus, he is fairly acknowledged as a theologian defending the same theological and political outlook as the council, yet deserves more credit for his own efforts in the area of contemplative spirituality and the history of ancient (and medieval) philosophical theology, beyond the narrow constraints of his short-lived tenure as bishop of Constantinople on the eve of the meeting on Trinitarian theology.

1. Gregory Nazianzen's place in mystical theology

One exceptional instance of the preference given to Gregory of Nyssa is that of Louth's introduction to Christian mysticism and theology.[4] As his title *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* indicates, Louth wished to trace the source of Christian 'mystical experience' from its origin in the Greek philosophical tradition until its final (in the world of late antiquity, at any rate) expression in the work of Dionysios the Areopagite. In the process, Louth makes special note of two luminaries of Alexandrian exegesis who would contribute to this tradition, Philo and Origen, both of whom together with Plotinus would re-engergize Platonic spirituality. Yet in his sweeping narrative, possibly due to the fact that the author pauses to consider in addition prominent Western authors (Augustine and St. John of the Cross), he nowhere takes opportunity to examine critically or at any length the role played by the theologian Gregory Nazianzen. Thus, unexplored directly is whether and to what extent Gregory the Theologian also shares the philosophical lineage traced to Plato and Plotinus, and how innovative his form of 'spiritual' exegesis in fact might have been, with the result that it would appear he deserves little more than a footnote in the history of mystical thought, and as if his title as 'theologian' were merely honorific. Yet the Theologian deserves more than that, not only in view of his lasting significance for Byzantine liturgy and monasticism, but also for the continuity of his theology with earlier Greek modes of philosophical rhetoric.

What little Louth does afford to Gregory Nazianzen, however, is worth consideration; for buried in one of his (often excellent) notes, the author identifies the value of *Or.* 38.7 in his discussion of the twin-theme of holy ignorance and divine illumination – in other, more significant authors in the history of spirituality. Gregory's language, of course, and its context within the oration each deserve closer attention; for the manner in which Gregory introduces this distinction, as a definitive account of the human subject's comportment *vis-à-vis* divine realities, in fact brings together a masterful synthesis of biblical salvation history and neo-Platonic, patristic explanations of the sources and limits of human knowing.

Moreover, in the Byzantine liturgy, which sought to establish its own, 'sacred' sense of rhythm and time – or, rather, to recover the human ability to see past our temporal affairs and touch the life of the triune God – such a soaring yet humble description would have been most at home, as one additional means of 'iconic' transport – away from the normal, temporal constraints of nature. This rupture, encouraged by Gregory's biblical exegesis in the festal oration 'On the nativity' (*Or.* 38), confirms a Christian vision of the kingdom of heaven as preparation for greater access reality, an alternative from the everyday experience

3. See *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters of Cledonius*, ed. Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), introduction for the comparison to modern opera; Gregory Nazianzen himself notes the deep influence of his friend and colleague's orations on the *Hexäemeron*, a sermon series finally completed by the former's brother and contemporary, Gregory of Nyssa—cf. *Or.* 43.67.1, in : F. Boulenger, *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours funèbres en l'honneur de son frère Césaire et de Basile de Césarée* (Paris : Picard, 1908), 58-230.

4. Andrew LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [orig. 1981]).

of social structures. In so many ways, its author helped to advance the cause of later Byzantine spirituality. In particular, the doctrine of divine 'illumination' which Louth rightly identifies in Gregory's text, and its special expression within the restrained language of negative theology, suggest that Nazianzen's role in shaping post-Nicene Christianity and spirituality remains worthy of sustained consideration.

2. Negative or 'apophatic' theology in the history of Christian thought

Numerous studies already treat the topic of negative theology, also known as 'apophatic' theology, at sufficient length. In addition to Louth's important work, other valuable authors to consult include Denys Turner and more recently Charles Stang, the latter of whom devotes special interest to the negative theology of Dionysius the Areopagite.[5] Although Maximos the Confessor would later introduce similar elements in his theology, in fact it is with the Areopagite that the fullness of mystical/negative theology occurs, especially in his two treatises *Mystical theology* and *On divine names*. Briefly stated, Dionysian gnosiology (or epistemology) states that the capacity for human knowledge of God is directly linked with the language employed, and in this way the resources of language and cognition equally suffer, being inadequate for the task of sufficiently describing the divine 'reality'.

Western authors will come to use the phrase 'analogy of being' to describe how God's relation to existence is at last only 'analogous' to human ways of being; while in the East, especially in the authorship of Dionysius, this distinction rests upon two modes of discourse eminently proper to mystical or symbolic theology – the *cataphatic*, which identifies the divine good according to human categories and means of experience, and the *apophatic*, more properly 'negative' in virtue of its effort to deny all possible human categories of the transcendent God. Seeds of this approach certainly are to be found within the Platonic tradition, and there seems to be scholarly agreement that this form of discourse appears within Christian theology even as early as Clement of Alexandria in the second century.[6]

In terms set forth above, the illuminated mystic benefits from both the knowledge of the 'cataphatic' way, as well as the presumed ignorance of the 'apophatic'. For Gregory Nazianzen, to be sure, he will speak of a profound human ignorance of God, which in the course of the biblical narrative of salvation receives a profound revelation or 'spark' of illumination that flashes like lightning – yet results in a more intimate form of human-divine intimacy, self-giving and surrender which remains a form of 'negative' knowledge. As Dionysius would write (in the fifth century?), Gregory already anticipates the quintessential insight of mystical theology, that God is somehow both far beyond all modes of human cognition, and yet equally present within human experience in some vivid and yet mysterious way. In other words, God's 'being' is totally unlike that of our own, so much so that we are right to speak of God as 'non-being'; yet nevertheless, perhaps especially within liturgy, one may suffer occasional glimpses of heightened awareness of the divine.

Other quandaries of the sort appear in a dense series of reflections, compressed by the Theologian within an explanation of the classical Christian anthropology of sin and grace, Adam and Christ, darkness and light. Thus, in *Oration* 38 the author clearly speaks in a register of theology and rhetoric that shows

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5. See Denys TURNER, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19-49 and Charles M. STANG, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: 'No Longer I'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also the same author's 'Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite,' in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 161-176. LOUTH, also, has a work devoted to this mysterious figure: *Denys the Areopagite* (New York: Continuum, 2001). For text, see *De mystica theologia* in *Corpus Dionysiacum II: Pseudo-dionysius Areopagita. De coelesti hierarchia, de ecclesiastica hierarchia, de mystica theologia, epistulae* [*Patristische Texte und Studien* 36. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991]: 141-150, ed. G. Heil and A.M. Ritter; and English trans. by Paul Rorem in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. Colm Luibhéid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 133-141.

6. J.W. TRIGG, 'Receiving the Alpha: Negative Theology in Clement of Alexandria and its Possible Implications,' *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997): 540-545; and Annewies VAN DEN HOEK, 'The "Catechetical" School of Early Christian Alexandria and Its Philonic Heritage,' *Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997): 59-87.

evident resemblance to the later authors Dionysios and Maximos the Confessor, perhaps in a way that is more apt than even the treatises of Gregory of Nyssa. To marshal additional evidence from Gregory Nazianzen's other orations would serve the aim of deepening our view of his own rhetorical skill, and use of the linguistic cues of negative theology, yet I wish instead to present in short detail select passages from his *Oration* 38 – which I hope will make more evident the author's affinity for the apophatic way, and his synthetic incorporation of such language within a profoundly Christian narrative on the occasion of Christ's birth.

3. Gregory Nazianzen's *oration* 38

Here, I hope only to provide an initial, summary glance at the characteristic features of Nazianzen's apparent negative theology, in the 38th oration 'On the nativity'. The passage highlighted for special attention in Louth's text is part of the Church father's oration delivered either at Christmas of 380 or Epiphany of 381 AD. The occasion was of course a festival – that is, a feast day – on which Gregory delivered a homily in which his prose glimmers with subtlety balanced phrasing and ornamental flourishes. In many respects, these devices come to a turning point as the author reaches section 7; for to this point, he has combined biblical references with sweeping oratory and a sense of celebrating the mystery of the Incarnation, and here he begins to speak about the sort of insight or 'special knowledge' reserved for the elect.

A central thought of the Oration begins even from the opening flourishes of the Theologian's *prooemion*, where Gregory cites the Psalm, 'Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice!' (Ps. 90:11). The author takes the distinction between heaven and earth as his starting point for a meditation on the Incarnation of Christ, and this move in turn becomes the occasion for Gregory's thoughts about the limits of nature, including those of human reason: 'heavenly now is earth-bound,' the author declares.[7] As he proceeds, the speaker repeats himself in so many different ways, if only in order to announce clearly the paradox of the Word made flesh – Gregory explains: 'the Laws of Nature are released; it is necessary that the higher order be fulfilled. Christ commands; let us not oppose.'[8]

For Maximos the Confessor, this saying will similarly provide the grounds for an extended account of the philosophy of nature, which Christ has now disrupted through his Incarnation. In Gregory's homily, the juxtaposition established with the harmonic rush of opening parallels creates a necessary frame of reference for the author's later meditation in praise of the ineffability of God's transcendence. For, as Gregory will go on to say, what is true of creation, as the basis for all human forms of thought and experience, is true of God only by analogy or likeness.

Like 'being' and any of the other divine names discussed by the author of the Dionysian corpus, Gregory introduces 'time' as a limiting feature of human experience that could never in fact apply equally to God: 'God always was, and is, and will be; or rather, God always is. For the words 'was' and 'will be' are only dividing marks for our way of keeping time, characteristic of nature's flux. Indeed, God is always and he gives himself this name, speaking to Moses on the mountain'.[9] The difference between God and nature, for Gregory, is thus a starting point for contemplation of God in himself, what was for Nazianzen the specific domain of theology properly so-called. One must recall, however, that Gregory introduces this distinction in the context of a homily in praise of the Word made flesh, which overcomes that divide between created beings and the Creator.

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7. As Nazianzen will later say, 'the Word has become thickened', « ὁ Λόγος παχύνεται »; *cf.* Greg. Naz., *Or* 38.1-2 in *Grégoire de Nazianze: Discours 38-41* (Sources Chrétiennes 358), ed. Claudio Moreschini (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990), 104-106 – N.B. the text of *SC* 358 simply reprints that of PG, which I will cite hereafter where required.

8. Greg. Naz. *Or.* 38.2.

9. Greg. Naz. *Or.* 38.7, *PG* 317B.1-5 (my translation above): « Θεὸς ἦν μὲν ἀεὶ καὶ ἔστι καὶ ἔσται μᾶλλον δὲ ἔστιν ἀεί. Τὸ γὰρ ἦν καὶ ἔσται, τοῦ καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς χρόνου τμήματα καὶ τῆς ῥευστῆς φύσεως ὁ δὲ ὤν ἀεὶ καὶ τοῦτο αὐτὸς ἑαυτὸν ὀνομάζει, τῷ Μωϋσεῖ χρηματίζων ἐπὶ τοῦ ὄρους. »

It is noteworthy, however, that Gregory interprets the theophany of Ex. 3:14 in view of measured time, and not in terms of 'being' in the manner of St. Thomas Aquinas and medieval Western metaphysics. Rather, the Theologian prefers to indicate God's eternity, or in other words his timelessness, a characteristic which is even in English grammar in fact marked by the same privation that Gregory will light upon in his litany of negations of the divine. So while 'was' and 'will be' are for Nazianzen words and indeed temporal zones that apply only to our created reality, 'is' alone (ὁ ὤν) truly communicates meaningfully of God – it is, even, as Gregory points out, a 'name' by which God reveals himself. In this respect, Gregory has a firm grasp on territory (later) covered by Dionysius.

So, while it may take some conceptual work on the reader's part in order to discern the essentially negative character of Gregory's theological speculations above, in what follows the Theologian continues with his stream of negations, often cast in the grammatical mould of the α-privative. God is ἄπειρον and ἀόριστον, 'unbounded' and 'unlimited' – he is somehow also ἄληπτον, or partially as if 'ungraspable.' The only notion that may be grasped, Gregory says, is that God is ἄπειρον, 'without limit.' Yet these negations, as much as they may be helpful in further determining the quality of Gregory's thought as akin to that of the negative theologians, do not exhaust the depth of this passage:

> For he holds the whole of being, gathering it together in himself, neither beginning nor ceasing, like a kind of boundless and limitless sea of being, surpassing all thought and time and nature. He is only sketched by the mind in images, and so merely in a limited and insufficient way, not from those things that deal with him directly, but only those which are somehow 'around him', with separate images drawn together into one impression of the truth, fleeing before it is grasped and disappearing before properly understood, so illuminating the guiding edge of our mind and purifying us, like 'a swift bolt of lightning that does not remain'.[10]

In what is perhaps surprising, Gregory explains how God is like a 'boundless and infinite sea of being, exceeding all thought and time and nature, sketched unevenly in the mind alone'. The mind or νοός, in other words, receives only an impression (ἴνδαλμα), and moreover it is an impression or sketch of the things 'around' God, not those that pertain to God without mediation. The ruling faculty, or τὸ ἡγεμονικόν instead is privileged to obtain a direct insight, however fleeting and momentary, of the truth communicated to the mind by way of images and analogies. While the mind is still struggling to process the value and meaning of all symbolic language of theology, the τὸ ἡγεμονικόν becomes illuminated, and serves some purifying role (or is itself purified), even as the divine ray dissipates from vision. As a faculty of the human person, who in Gregory's anthropology is necessarily a created, temporal being, this light-receiving aspect of the mind remains bound by the limitations of time; and yet, according to Gregory, it may somehow in the midst of 'darkness' have a momentary insight into the realm beyond.

One may simply propose that Gregory the Theologian has an imprecise grasp of the philosophical lexicon, yet he uses the same term (τὸ ἡγεμονικόν) elsewhere in *Or*. 27.3. As in the present text, there Gregory attributes both epistemological and moral dimensions to the guiding faculty τὸ ἡγεμονικόν, as preliminary qualifications for the study of theology.[11] Whether the author indeed has in mind a certain

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10. Greg. Naz. *Or*. 38.7, PG 317B5*ff*. (my translation, last line adapted from *St Gergory of Nazianzus : Festal Orations*, trans. N.V. HARRISON [Yonkers, NY : St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008]) : « Ὅλον γὰρ ἐν ἑαυτῷ συλλαβὼν ἔχει τὸ εἶναι, μήτε ἀρξάμενον μήτε παυσόμενον, οἷόν τι πέλαγος οὐσίας ἄπειρον καὶ ἀόριστον, πᾶσαν ὑπερεκπίπτων ἔννοιαν καὶ χρόνου καὶ φύσεως, νῷ μόνῳ σκιαγραφούμενος, καὶ τοῦτο λίαν ἀμυδρῶς καὶ μετρίως, οὐκ ἐκ τῶν κατ᾽ αὐτόν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐκ τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν, ἄλλης ἐξ ἄλλου φαντασίας συλλεγομένης εἰς ἕν τι τῆς ἀληθείας ἴνδαλμα, πρὶν κρατηθῆναι φεῦγον καὶ πρὶν νοηθῆναι διαδιδράσκον, τοσαῦτα περιλάμπων ἡμῶν τὸ ἡγεμονικόν, καὶ ταῦτα κεκαθαρμένων, ὅσα καὶ ὄψιν ἀστραπῆς τάχος οὐχ ἱσταμένης. »

11. Greg. Naz. *Or*. 27.3: 'What is the right time? Whenever we are free from the mire and noise without, and our commanding faculty « τὸ ἡγεμονικόν » is not confused by illusory, wandering images, leading us, as it were, to mix fine script with ugly scrawling, or sweet-smelling scent with slime. We need actually "to be still" in order to know God, and when we receive the opportunity, "to judge uprightly" in theology,' in: *St Gregory of Nazianzus, On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams (Crestwood, NY:

hierarchy of intellectual faculties, in which one enjoys a superiority of function, what is conclusive is the Theologian's sense of humanity's epistemological status: whether through impressions in the mind, or through a brief hint of grasping their truth, the divine light illumines human minds only in small doses.

4. Elements of Platonism in *oration* 38

In at least three ways, however, Gregory of Nazianzus makes use of Platonic resources, and indeed may appeal to pre-platonic philosophers as well. First, Gregory the Theologian speaks of a 'boundless and infinite sea of being,' which Claudio Moreschini points out has certain precedent in Plato's *Symposium*.[12] Second, the repeated use of ἄπειρον as an elevated and unassailable term for the divine of course enjoys a longstanding tradition in the Greek philosophical tradition, originating as early as the 6th century pre-Socratic authors. However wide-ranging a path it took, the ἄπειρον reaches Gregory Nazianzen's dynamic vocabulary with a long history of prior use, which he adapts to satisfy his own purposes in presenting a spiritual epistemology that presumes increased (yet endless?) proximity to the divine through stages of progress. Finally, as I have already indicated, there is a simultaneous process of moral purification combined with the passage toward likeness to God, and on this score again Nazianzen recapitulates earlier concerns central to Platonic moral development, evidenced in the so-called middle dialogues.[13]

These three elements may be observed as the Theologian closes this speculative digression by venturing to express a form of the doctrine of deification:

> It seems to me that insofar as it is graspable, the divine draws [us] toward itself, for what is completely ungraspable is unhoped for and unsought. Yet one wonders at the ungraspable, and one desires more intensely the object of wonder, and being desired it purifies, and purifying it makes deiform, and with those who have become such he converses as with those close to him,–I speak with vehement boldness– God is united with gods, and he is thus known, perhaps as much as he already knows those who are known to him.[14]

It seems that Louth's particular assessment may indeed prove valid, since one finds here good evidence of movement from ignorance to increasing degrees of knowledge. Moreover, the Theologian imagines higher degrees of intimacy with the divine only through prolonged exposure to the intensely purifying centre of communion within the human mind. A Platonic emphasis on purity achieved through subsequent stages of growth in love, or moral development through love of beauty, resounds clearly – even if Gregory has not distinguished the nature of ascent in detail. His purpose, after all, is not to remain on this level of pure 'abstraction', but rather to contemplate the so-called 'economy' as he does in following sections, rehearsing the biblical narrative that culminates with the nativity of Christ.

SVS Press, 2002), 4; cf. *Gregorius Nazianzenus: Adversus Eunomianos (orat. 27)* in *Gregor von Nazianz. Die fünf theologischen Reden*, ed. J. Barbel (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1963).

12. Plato *Symposium* 210D: « ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ πέλαγος τετραμμένος τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ θεωρῶν πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς τίκτῃ καὶ διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ » in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Medford, MA: Oxford University Press, 1903); 'turning rather towards the main ocean of the beautiful may by contemplation of this bring forth in all their splendor [*sic*] many fair fruits of discourse and meditation in a plenteous crop of philosophy,' in *Plato, Vol. 9*, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

13. Of course, one may also think of Plato's famous cave allegory, in which the 'prisoners' receive only a faint refraction of the light of day; see *Republic* 514A-520A.

14. Greg. Naz. *Or*. 38.7, *PG* 317C:14-22 (trans. HARRISON) « Ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν, ἵνα τῷ ληπτῷ μὲν ἕλκῃ πρὸς ἑαυτόν - τὸ γὰρ τελέως ἄληπτον, ἀνέλπιστον καὶ ἀνεπιχείρητον - τῷ δὲ ἀλήπτῳ θαυμάζεται, θαυμαζόμενον δὲ ποθῆται πλέον, ποθούμενον δὲ καθαίρῃ, καθαῖρον δὲ θεοειδεῖς ἐργάζεται, τοιούτοις δὲ γενομένοις, ὡς οἰκείοις, ἥδη προσομιλῇ - τολμᾷ τι ·νεανικὸν ὁ λόγος - Θεὸς θεοῖς ἑνούμενός τε καὶ γνωριζόμενος, καὶ τοσοῦτον ἴσως ὅσον ἥδη γινώσκει τοὺς γινωσκομένους. »

5. Conclusion: Knowledge of God – Whether Angel or Human?

Despite the negations found in abundance, one must only return to the opening lines of Nazianzen's homily in order to recognize the simultaneous place of emphasis given to positive language that describes God in the Incarnation. In what is surely a double-reference to Gen. 1:3-4 and Jn. 1:1-5 the Theologian begins his oration by rejoicing: 'again the darkness is dissolved, again the light is set in place'. The *leitmotif* continues as Gregory remarks how 'again Egypt is punished in darkness, again the people of Israel by a pillar are illuminated.' Finally, Nazianzen rephrases the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'Let the people sitting in the darkness of ignorance (ἐν σκότει τῆς ἀγνοίας) see a great light of knowledge (φῶς μέγα τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως).'[15] Here, Nazianzen provides an additional gloss for the words darkness and light (σκότος and φῶς), so that he emphasizes the one (darkness) as 'ignorance' and the other (light) as positive knowledge.[16]

That is not the end of the story, however, because the Theologian in the course of his recapitulation of the history of salvation must mention the fallibility of angels, who while 'difficult to move' (δυσκινήτους) are nevertheless somehow changeable and thus capable of being turned away from their divine station. The example given in this respect by Gregory is the 'one called Lucifer on account of his brightness (διὰ τὴν λαμπρότητα), but because of his pride he became and is called *darkness*'.[17] In direct contrast to the manner of deification mentioned in passing at *Or.* 38.7, which builds upon the Theologian's allusion at *Or.* 38.2 to the prophet Isaiah and the Pentateuch, the one called Ἑωσφόφος and his angels suffer the terrible woe of having fallen or passed away from their knowledge of God, thereby becoming fashioners of evil 'by flight their from the Good' (τῇ τοῦ καλοῦ φυγῇ).

Judging from this supporting passage, in conjunction with the emphasis on *reason* that Nazianzen finds in the economy of the created order, he presents a coherent and integral view of the rationality of the universe, under the light of its Creator.[18] This measured approach, of course, remains in keeping with Gregory's commitment to Platonic epistemology, even when he goes on to speak of God's superabundant form of being that transcends all human categories. By making the human person more in tune with the source of all reason, goodness and depth of being, proximity to God nevertheless entails a certain form of *un*-knowing, what the Western medieval tradition will capture at its best. To distinguish this form of knowledge as 'learned ignorance' in contrast to the ignorance brought on by disobedience, sin and death, is a key task of the mystical theologian. In presenting the case of Lucifer and his like company, Gregory holds up a counterexample against which to view his positive doctrine of the soul's flight to the God beyond all time and being and finite reality, in whose embrace both recognition and total abandon are key witnesses.

The spiritual quest of the human family, according to Gregory the Theologian, is thus to be one from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge, even if that final mode of knowing is something that transcends ordinary intellectual functions of the mind. In this way, Gregory Nazianzen moves past the time-honoured edifice of Greek thought in order to penetrate the mystery of knowing and being known, in a way expressed also by the Psalms and his own contemporaries even in the West.[19] He thus combines glowing rhetoric with his account of cognitive and emotional experience of the sacred, to the point of describing that union of natures as 'God made one with and known by gods, as much as perhaps he knows those who are

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15. Greg. Naz. *Or.* 38.2, *PG* 313A « Πάλιν τὸ σκότος λύται, πάλιν τὸ φῶς ὑφίσταται, πάλιν Αἴγυπτος σκότῳ κολάζεται, πάλιν Ἰσραὴλ στύλῳ φωτίζεται. Ὁ λαὸς ὁ καθήμενος ἐν σκότει τῆς ἀγνοίας ἰδέτω φῶς μέγα τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως. Τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν · ἰδοὺ γέγονε τὰ πάντα καινά. » *Cf.* Is 9:1 LXX, « ὁ λαὸς ὁ πορευόμενος ἐν σκότει, ἴδετε φῶς μέγα ·οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου, φῶς λάμψει ἐφ᾽ ὑμᾶς. »

16. In fact, the text of the Septuagint compares darkness rather to 'death' (Is 9.1, 'for those dwelling in the region and darkness of death, light has shone'), with the corresponding idea that light prepares the way for life.

17. Greg. Naz. *Or.* 38.9, *PG* 321A:15-16 « Πείθει δέ με μὴ ἀκινήτους, ἀλλὰ δυσκινήτους, καὶ ὑπολαμβάνειν ταύτας καὶ λέγειν ὁ διὰ τὴν λαμπρότητα Ἑωσφόφος, σκότος διὰ τὴν ἔπαρσιν καὶ γενόμενος καὶ λεγόμενος, αἵ τε ὑπ᾽ αὐτὸν ἀποστατικαὶ δυνάμεις, δημιουγοὶ τῆς κακίας τῇ τοῦ καλοῦ φυγῇ, καὶ ἡμῖν πρόξενοι. »

18. Greg. Naz. *Or.* 38.8-13.

19. E.g. Ps 139:13 – the same can be found in Augustine *conf.* 3.11, *CCL* 27, 33: 'you were nearer than my inmost parts, and higher than my highest' (my translation).

known'.[20] Surely the language here is forceful enough that Gregory deserves credit for his role in shaping the heritage of Byzantine Christian mysticism?

In his distinct form of intuitive reasoning, Gregory identifies the source and goal of human intellectual 'desire', the God who transforms, animates and fulfils the human mind as the seat of personality and wisdom. Because this brilliant reality also transcends every operation of the soul, and in view of Gregory's consistent restrained language, I have identified his mode of discourse as 'negative theology' – a claim, perhaps, which deserves further clarification. To appreciate this rhetorical feature within the many orations delivered by the Theologian would require a more detailed study of the precise emphasis on knowledge, divine revelation, God's manifestation in Christ, and the superabundant ecstasy of unknowing in each of them, and as an entire corpus. For the moment, I think it may be safe to say that Gregory's various points of contact with forms of thought and religious symbolism beyond his own corner of the Mediterranean world should demonstrate his role as an agent of cultural formation.

In other words, as much as he may rely upon the Cappadocian milieu for inspiration and support, including the common heritage of Origen of Alexandria, Gregory the Theologian must be engaged as a mediator who stood at the end of a long fourth century, shaping and transmitting a synthesis of Greek philosophical rhetoric and biblical theology within a liturgy context that would itself remain a permanent fixture of the Byzantine world.

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20. Greg. Naz. 38.7, *PG* 317C: 20-22, « Θεὸς θεοῖς ἐνούμενός τε καὶ γνωριζόμενος, καὶ τοσοῦτον ἴσως ὅσον ἤδη γινώσκει τοὺς γινωσκομένος. »